

WWII Story and Veterans Day Speech

(I was asked to give the 2012 Veterans Day Speech at Maywood High School)

Good afternoon and welcome to our Veteran's Day celebration. Thank you for being here.

We're here today to honor the service and sacrifices made by generations of American veterans. Not only in times of war, but in times of peace, too. Though Americans have rarely sought war and have usually tried to avoid it, the United States has fought in several major wars in its 230-year history, as well as a number of smaller conflicts. And in many of those engagements, Americans have expanded and defended the freedoms and security of Americans, and that of millions of other people around the world. Even today, as American men and women risk their lives fighting in ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, other American soldiers stand guard in places like Korea, still defending the peace almost 60 years after the Korean War ended. Former President Ronald Reagan put it best when he said, "Most people spend their lives wondering if they made a difference. The Marines don't have that problem." Of course, he could have been talking about any of the services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, National Guard, and others

Today, we particularly thank the veterans and current servicemen and women who have called Maywood and Curtis and other surrounding towns home. Too often, we look for heroes and role models on TV, or in magazines, or in the worlds of sports and celebrity. It's not that heroes don't exist in those places, but that there are other heroes, and other role models, living every day right next to us, if only we will take the time to listen to their stories, and to try to understand, as best we can, what they did and why they did it. So, to our veterans and current men and women in uniform...for your service, across all the years, we thank you. For your dedication to duty, in all its different forms, we thank you. For your sacrifices, the vast majority of which we will never hear about, we thank you. And for your stories, it falls on each one of us here to ask you to tell them, to educate us, and in some cases to entertain us.

Before we present colors, I would like to tell a story. A story that I believe is appropriate for the occasion, even if it teaches a hard lesson.

On April 21, 1945, in the final days of WWII, with Hitler's 3rd Reich in its last hours, 137 American B-24 bombers took off from their base in England and lifted up into the skies above Europe for one final mission. The war was all but over, but there had been one last bombing mission ordered. The primary target was a railroad bridge near the city of Salzburg. But a thunderstorm, combined with thick, low clouds and fog, obscured the primary target. The command pilot in the lead B-24 ultimately decided to abort the mission and return to base in England. He gave the signal to all the planes in the formation for a turn to the right, which led the bombers over the city of Regensburg, a city that had been heavily bombed during the war. One of the planes in the formation was named the Black Cat. The youngest member of its crew, from Brooklyn New York, was just 18 years old. The oldest crew member, from Peoria, Illinois, was just 29. The crew called him "Pops" for fun. Most relevant to our short story was another crew member, Howard Goodner, from Tennessee, who was only 23 and seemingly had the rest of his life in front of him now that the war was essentially over.

Only one anti-aircraft battery was still operating in Regensburg, but as the American bombers flew past the city, it cut loose with two bursts of fire. One of those shots, an 88 mm shell, ripped through the wing of the Black Cat between the #1 and #2 engines. The wing of the plane folded, the plane flipped over on its back, and it began a long, cartwheeling spiral toward the ground below. As it would turn out, the Black Cat was the last American bomber lost in Europe in WWII.

Just two weeks later, on May 8, 1945, in a small town in Tennessee, Kally Goodner, the mother of Howard, was planning on taking part in the celebration going on outside her house. You see, May 8 was VE Day, or Victory in Europe Day, marking the surrender of Germany and an end to WWII in the European theater. Outside, church bells were chiming, car horns were blaring, and many of the townspeople whom Kally was friends with had gathered. But it was then that a Western Union Telegram truck pulled up outside Kally Goodner's house. For Kally, it was a dreaded, horrifying site. Kally's son Howard, of course, had been on the Black Cat, shot down over Regensburg. With hands shaking, she opened the telegram. It was from the US War Department, and read, "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son, technical sergeant Goodner, Howard G, was killed in action in Germany on 21 April." And so, on the very same day that Kally Goodner's

friends and neighbors celebrated the end of combat in Europe, Kally was given the worst news of her life, that her son was one of the last American soldiers to give his life in the battle to defeat Hitler.

Some time later, Howard's personal items arrived home to Kally in a small box. In the box were a few photographs, a wrist watch, a pair of sunglasses, and some coins. Kally wrote about this moment, saying, "I sat staring silently at the box in which these things had come. It was such a small box to hold all the laughter, tears, hope, and apprehension which had been packed into it. It was hard to believe that it had all vanished, leaving behind only a small pile of my son's items and the memories of his life."

That scene was certainly repeated in hundreds and even thousands of American homes during WWII. And it's a reminder that, even in victory, even when the war is won, there is heartbreak. And as Americans, we should not, ever, forget the sacrifices made by our soldiers, our veterans, or their families.

Thank you.